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Death Valley: One Extremely Hot Weather Station



The Death Valley National Park weather station in July 2013.

By Chris Stachelski, NWS Eastern Region Observing and Climate Services Program Manager

Partnerships are the foundation of the NWS cooperative weather observing program for the last 130 years. If it were not for the commitment and dedication of countless individuals over the years, NWS would not be able to place equipment and collect observations to at the level it has.

While many cooperative observing stations are on the properties of an individual or family residence, a large

number are at various kinds of government and private institutions.

These sites are government agencies at the local, county, state and federal level, non-profit organizations, private companies and so on. One the most significant institutional contributors are water treatment plants.

One federal agency with a nationwide presence that serves as an observer at many sites is the National Park Service. The National Parks have a huge interest in weather for daily park activities. Visitors also want climate information to help plan

These records form part of the park's slogan of "Hottest. Driest. Lowest," showing how big of a role weather plays in this park of extremes.



Crowds watch a park ranger take the official high temperature reading at the 100th Anniversary of the World's Hottest Temperature on record in July 1913.

a park trip in the future or conduct research into topics such as plant or wildlife species in a park.

As a result, a number of National Park Service sites have maintained a cooperative weather observing station for a half of a century or more.

Typically, collecting observations once a day falls is included in the duties of the park rangers at a visitor center or other office or routinely staffed post.

Cooperative weather observing stations can be found in National Park Service sites such as Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Arches, Zion, Lake Mead, Great Smoky Mountains and more. Some large national parks have multiple cooperative weather stations to keep a record in various points in the park facility to reflect microclimates.

Of all the cooperative weather observing sites in the National Parks, one attracts the highest international interest among the weather and climate community, the station at Death Valley National Park in southeastern California at the Furnace Creek Visitors Center.

The Death Valley site was founded in 1911 at the Greenland Ranch by the Pacific

Borax Company. In addition to being the driest location in the United States on average annually of any official weather station, the site holds two impressive weather records.

The first record was set on July 10, 1913, when the high temperature reached 134°F, which is recognized by the World Meteorological Organization as the world's hottest temperature ever. The second record occurred in 1929 when the site went the entire year without any precipitation, tying for the nation's driest year on record.

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In 1958, the National Park Service took over as the observer and in 1961, the site moved to its current enclosed area at the Furnace Creek Visitor Center.

In 2015, NWS installed an automated weather station next to the legacy weather observing equipment at the site. This equipment allows NWS to get a continuous weather record versus a daily snapshot at observation time. Park rangers continue to check the manual legacy equipment.

During the warm season, and especially the summer months, Death Valley is often the hottest location in the country. Many visitors travel to the park from around the globe to experience the extreme heat. Although it has not surpassed 129°F since 1913, many people still can claim to have experienced their personal highest temperature ever here.

The Park Service has maintained an excellent working relationship with the NWS over the years at this site, which attracts significant media attention in addition to science scrutiny.

In 2013, in honor of the 100th anniversary of the 134°F reading, the two agencies help a special 1-day event at Death Valley to offer an in depth look into the extreme climate of the park.

Having worked at the NWS Las Vegas from 2008 to 2016, part of my job was to maintain the records and climatological database for the site. I also helped maintain the equipment.

My most memorable experience was in the late spring of 2013 when I came to

the park to paint the instrument shelter with a fresh coat of white paint.

Living in Las Vegas, I was used to working outside when the temperature rose into the 90s, which really isn't that hot to a desert dweller; however, the soil in Death Valley gets dangerously hot quickly.

When air temperatures rise to the triple digits, ground readings can rise to more than 200°F at the surface. I was wearing a pair of dress shoes versus sneakers and my feet felt like they were on fire after about an hour.

Luckily, I did not injure myself but it shows how hot it can get there when you are standing in one spot on the ground. Each NWS COOP site nationwide has its own idiosyncracies. Maintenance issues vary dramatically.

Stories like this are often shared with the NWS field offices at the cooperative observing network course offered at the NWS Training Center in Kansas City. It's at this center that staff in the trenches share stories and experiences to students learning the ropes of this program.



Staff from the National Weather Service in Las Vegas replace the cotton region temperature shelter at Death Valley in 2015.

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John Campanius Holm Award



Marguerite Gosbee of Harmony, ME, was awarded the John Campanius Holm Award and 20 Year Length of Service Award for her dedication and quality observations.

From left is Meteorologist in Charge (MIC) **Hendricus Lulofs**, NWS Gray, ME; Observer **Marguerite Gosbee**; and Senior Service Hydrologist (SSH) **Thomas Hawley**. Photo by Observing Program Leader (OPL) **Nikki Becker**, NWS Gray, ME.

75 Year Honored Institution Award

The **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at Franklin Falls Dam** in New Hampshire accepted a 75 Year Honored Institution Award.

From left are Park Rangers **Karen Hoey**, **Daniel Lapolla** and **Daniel Orlando**, and Project Manager **Tia Mercer**. MIC **Hendricus Lulofs**, NWS Gray, ME, right, present the award. Photo by OPL **Nikki Becker**, NWS Gray, ME.



50 Year Honored Institution Awards

The **City of Anderson, SC, Fire Department** received an Honored Institution Award for 50 years of service.

Official weather records for Anderson have been taken since 1884, and for the past 50 years, firefighters from Station 2 have been recording their daily observations.

The award was presented by OPL **Chris Horne** NWS Greenville-Spartanburg, SC.



Denver Mountain Parks in Morrison, CO, was awarded a 50 Year Honored Institution Award for continued dedicated service to the NWS.

Pictured from left are NWS Boulder, CO, Warning Coordination Meteorologist (WCM) **Greg Hanson**, Staff Assistant **Ann Sweet**, Landscape Architect Superintendent **Richard Gannon**, and OPL **Jim Kalina**, NWS Boulder, CO.

45 Dick Hagemeyer and 25 Year Service Awards



Jim Benovic of Montague, MI, was honored with the a 45 Year Dick Hagemeyer award. Jim, along with his wife **Marilyn's** support, has been taking observations since 1974. Living only 2 miles from Lake Michigan, they have observed a changing climate over the decades with winters typically less severe in recent years, but also a climate that is becoming much wetter. A retiree from the U.S. Postal Service, Jim first became aware of the COOP program in a local newspaper ad. In addition to his daily reports, Jim will call the office to relay significant weather information in real time. Jim and Marilyn enjoy gardening, traveling, and spending time with family. Photo courtesy of Marilyn Benovic.

Maynard Webster of New Sharon, ME, accepted a 45 Year Length of Service Award from MIC Hendricus Lulofs, NWS Gray, ME, SSH **Thomas Hawley** and OPL **Nikki Becker**. No photo.

Dan Gropper, observer in Vienna, VA, has contributed 25 years of service to NWS Washington DC/Baltimore, MD. Dan also serves as a SKYWARN storm spotter and serves numerous other community roles as a volunteer. He is an invaluable resource in the National Capitol area and a really nice guy. Dan does weather as a business as well as a hobby. He is the owner of Thunder Eagle Inc. Photo by **Gayle Gropper**, Dan's wife.



25 and 20 Year Length of Service Awards



Sammy Rhodes has served as the observer for Sargents, CO, since 1993. He was presented with a 25 Year Length of Service Award by OPL **Michael Nosko**, NWS Pueblo, CO. Sammy has faithfully recorded daily temperatures, rainfall and snowfall data.

Mal Sillars has served as a weather observer for Buena Vista, CO, since 1999. He was presented with a 20 Year Length of Service by OPL **Michael Nosko**, NWS Pueblo CO. Mal has recently handed over the primary observer duties to the staff at the Central Colorado Regional Airport in Buena Vista, where the equipment is located, but he plans to remain involved and provide his expertise to the observers at the site.

Park Ranger **Christie Baker**, **US Army Corps of Engineers**, at Otter Brook Lake and Surry Mountain Lake in Keene, NH, accepted a 20 Year Length of Service Award from NWS Grey, ME. No photo taken.



Ned Beecher and **Chris Clyne** of Tamworth, NH, right, accepted a 20 Year Length of Service Award from NWS MIC **Hendricus Lulofs**, NWS Gray, ME, left. Photo by OPL **Nikki Becker**.



15 and 10 Year Length of Service Awards

Vicki Delalla of North Stratford, NH, accepted a 15 Year Length of Service Award. No photo taken.

Ryan Burton of Wintrop Utilities Diestric in Winthrop, ME, accepted a 10 Year Length of Service Award. No photo taken.



Harry Irick at Ware Shoals, SC, was presented a 10 Year Length of Service Award by OPL **Chris Horne**, NWS Greenville-Spartanburg, SC. Harry served 17 years with the Ware Shoals Police Department and retired as chief in 2017.



Howard Votruba, right, has served as the observer for the Sheridan Lake area in eastern Colorado since 2009. He was presented with a 10 Year Length of Service Award by OPL **Michael Nosko**, NWS Pueblo, CO. Howard has provided excellent weather observations, accurately recording daily temperatures, rainfall and snowfall data for Sheridan Lake, CO.

Mark McKenna of Rumford, ME, accepted a 10 Year Length of Service Award. No photo taken.

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National
Cooperative Program
Thomas.Trunk
@noaa.gov

Managing Editor
Melody.Magnus
@noaa.gov

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